

Legends of Olympia¹ VIII

by Cléanthis Paleologos ©

Glaukos of Karistos-Boxer

At noon and in the heat of the day a wanderer reached a shady pine wood next to the dusty road. It was overcast and stiflingly hot with the sky getting darker and darker. The rays of the sun shone dimly through the clouds and the earth was scorchingly hot. The soil, thirsty and parched with wide fissures gaped as if longing to absorb the rains from heaven. The heat was heavy and oppressive. It stretched out everywhere, sending wave after wave of trembling, burning air as far as the eye could reach, making people gasp for breath.

The vineyards had been reaped, only a few limp leaves remained on the fig trees, the oleanders and myrtle bushes were wilted and limp. The peasants had started ploughing the land awaiting the first rain fall, but the earth was so dry and parched that it made toiling very hard.

The wanderer lay under the pines, a big-boned man with thick, black hair and beard. He seemed exhausted from the long walk and from the dense atmosphere which made breathing difficult. He had hardly stretched his tired and weary limbs when a voice made him start. Turning his head he observed a youth standing in a field by his oxen and pulling out a plough from the hard baked earth. The youth tried to fix the ploughshare which had become undone to a hard, pointed peg. He was talking

loudly to himself and seemed very angry. His oxen had lifted their heavy heads breathing with difficulty. He tried pressing the ploughshare down with his hand but seemed unable to fix it to the wood; it kept moving about constantly as it must have done before and the youth made endless efforts to fasten the ploughshare on to the shaft. Then suddenly and with an angry shout he raised his hand and brought it down heavily on the iron shares. The impact made a squelching thud, wedging the ploughshares firmly and startling the oxen. The wanderer cried out:

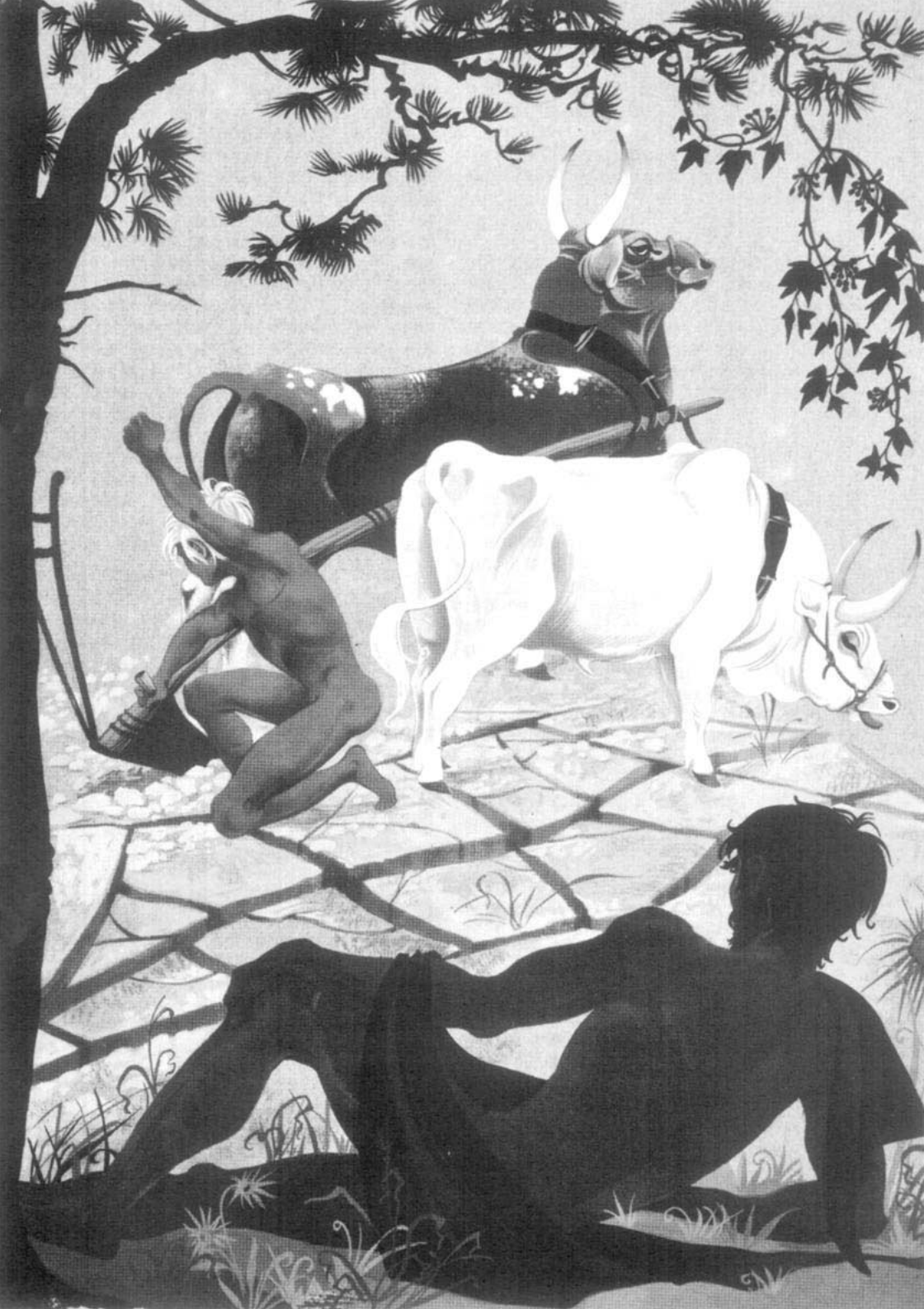
“Oh great Zeus and Mother Earth, what an incredible blow!” and getting up went into the half ploughed field and stood in front of the youth.

The field was only a short distance away from the port of Karystos and the traveller was the famous trainer Tisias. The youth was Glaukos, son of Demylos, a labourer on his father’s land.

Thus one of the greatest athletes that Greece ever bore, during the twelve hundred years of the Olympic Games, entered history.

Fate was kind and had arranged it so that on this particular day the famous trainer had to pass the country road near the fertile and famed Karystos. He was a famed trainer and very prominent in the palaestras of populous Athens. His experienced eye at once discerned the explosive powers which were

¹ See “Olympic Review” since No 64-65.



hidden in the youth, and he brought him to Athens and started to instruct him in boxing.

But as very often happens, enthusiasm won over wisdom and nearly brought on final disaster.

Tisias was too hasty in bringing the inexperienced youth to Olympia, where forceful and well known athletes, full of experience and well trained, came to contest for the most famed prize in the greatest games and where art conquers even the roughest and most unpolished force.

It was in 520 B.C. at the 65th Olympic Games. Glaukos had drawn his lot and was facing his adversary fearlessly. The herald with a thundering voice announced their names. Glaukos heard his name and his mind flew away to Karystos and to his father and so did not pay any attention to his opponent's name. His hands were entwined in long leather thongs and his fingers felt quite painful. The thongs made the blows harder because they rendered the hands stiff.

The judge gave the sign and Glaukos threw himself at once on his adversary.

But he, avoiding him, jumped right and left, forwards and backwards and now and again thrust his arm out punching him hard in the breast, face and ribs.

He whirled around and turned and avoided him constantly. Glaukos' heavy punches which were slow but sure were either hitting the air or his opponent's shadow. He felt quite puzzled and inexperienced. Why did the opponent thrust out his right fist while striking with his left? Why did this deer-like creature escape him? Why did he always jump about, why could he never

stay in one place? if he could only corner him and give him one punch, one blow in the chest, there would be no need for a second. But the other continued to jump around and escaped him the whole time. Did they not meet to have a real boxing bout? He followed his adversary and pursued him but the other always succeeded in moving away and, in retreating, always managed a hard blow. And his blows were well aimed and he hit hard, one in the face, another in the chest and yet another in the ribs. Glaukos' mouth showed a bloody streak. He continued running after his adversary but it was like getting hold of a shadow. For a moment he succeeded and his arm fell heavily on the other's breast. The opponent was shaken, but retreating and finding Glaukos unprotected, he managed yet another hard blow.

Glaukos then decided to attack but he got beaten again and not by his opponent's power but by his technique and agility. Had any one else been in his place he would have long ago been lying on the ground. He was hot and the pains which he felt everywhere on his body made him stubborn. Had there been a tree in front of him, he would have knocked it down with one punch.

All he wished for was to have him right there in front of him. But his adversary jumped here and there, slipped away and escaped him. Glaukos attacked with clenched fists but his punches and blows did not reach the opponent, who moved all the time winding and turning and delivering his blows with great cunning.

Tisias was in agony. He had by then realized his error. How could he have been carried away by his enthusiasm? In the game force was not the sole

factor. Skill came before force. It was said that with skill alone Pollux, the Hero, had managed to vanquish Amykos, the king who had murdered all his adversaries. How Tisias now repented! How very rash was he to have brought this strong youth to Olympia.

Glaukos received blow after blow not knowing how to protect himself. The other, becoming bolder, attacked quite openly aiming to deliver the final blow to the untrained youth.

But suddenly a flash like lightning went through Tisias' brain. He remembered the field, the plough, the oxen, the ploughshares, the blow... by Zeus... that blow...! He let out a desperate cry and the voice boomed like a bell and hit Glaukos one more blow.

"Oh my child, strike... as you did when you fixed the ploughshares!"

Glaukos heard the command. He roused himself as if coming to his senses, as if up to now he had been tied down and had now been suddenly released. Tisias had taught him how to strike out with his right fist and how with his left, how to stand and how to move. Now permission was granted to strike as only he knew.

Thrusting his left fist out as if to protect himself, he started slowly approaching the opponent who, certain of being able to deliver the clever and perhaps final blow, let him advance. Suddenly Glaukos' right fist, like the heavy hammer falling on the anvil flattening a sheet of iron, descended heavily on the face of his opponent. The unlucky opponent fell unconscious to the ground and Glaukos quite surprised fell into Tisias' open arms.

From that day on, the 65th Olympic Games, began the fairy-tale-like career of the much praised Glaukos of Karystos.

After his first victory in boxing for boys, he won another three Olympic victories in the men's boxing, eight in both the Isthmian and Nemean games, two in the Pythian games, and many more victories in the local contests of Athens, Thebes, Rhodes and other towns. His fame had become so great that it was said that he descended from Anthedon in Boiotia, from Glaukos the daemonic spirit of the sea.

Loucian¹ mentions the praising lines written in his honour by Simonides:² "Neither could Pollux, with his incalculable force, lift an arm against him nor could Alkmene's child his club."³

Glaukos' statue in Olympia was dedicated by his son and was made by Glaukias the celebrated sculptor of Aegina. As Pausanias describes it: "The figure is shadow boxing because Glaukos had the best natural hand movement in his generation."⁴

This inexpert youth who nearly lost his first fight at Olympia became famous and a great expert in the art of boxing. The writer and traveller Pausanias mentions that he died at a venerable age and that after his death the Karystians worshipped him as a hero and buried him with great honours on an island in the gulf of Euboea, which to this day is called Glaukos island.⁵

C.P.

(to follow)

¹ Louc. "Icons". 29.

² Simon. Poetae Lyrici Graeci 1, III, 119.

³ He means the demigod Hercules.

⁴ Paus. VI, 10, 1.

⁵ Paus. VI, 10, 3.